

High schoolers failing county final in Montgomery school system? No problem.

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The SAT and Advanced Placement results, put out so proudly by the Montgomery County school system, suggest that it is among the best districts in the country, but the country has seen no significant increase in math or reading achievement for 17-year-olds in 30 years.

Dan Stephens, who teaches math at Northwood High School, thinks he knows why. It is a reason I have never heard before from his renowned district.

The most prevalent complaint, buttressed by the new documentary "Race to Nowhere" being shown in Montgomery County, is that teachers and principals put too much pressure on the kids. They are jittery, sleep-deprived, maybe suicidal.

Stephens, who teaches precalculus and geometry to mostly average kids, thinks his students are the opposite of too stressed. They don't try very hard and know they will still graduate, so no problem.

"All I can do is beg my students to study. Ultimately, they know they don't have to and don't," said Stephens, who has taught for 20 years. "I would guess fewer than a handful actually studied for their test last week. No joke."

Among the most important reasons for that, Stephens says, are the countywide final examinations in core subjects such as English, social studies, science and math. They are important two-hour tests, written not by Stephens or other classroom teachers but by county experts. They are "kept locked and sealed until the day we give them," Stephens said, "and we must sign documents, under penalty of dismissal, promising not to assist students in any way."

And yet, a student who flunks one of those exams is usually promoted to the next grade, and the next level course, as if that hard work writing and protecting the exams meant nothing. "The majority of my precalculus students have never passed one of these exams in either Algebra 1, geometry or Algebra 2, all precalculus prerequisites," Stephens said. "Nevertheless, they proceeded to the next level. . . . Students are well aware that failure, even pathetic failure, will not prevent them from going on to the next level. Most of my students have failed multiple final exams in other subjects as well, but they still earned credit for those classes."

In Montgomery County, any good faith effort on regular assignments earns at least 50 percent. if you complete the work, you pass, even if you don't understand it well.

Accustomed to final exam failure without serious consequences - at least if they are among the many with no desire to get into a competitive college and thus no need for an A - Stephens's students have little to motivate them and act like it, he said.

"They're smart, shrewd kids who will do the minimum to get by," he said. "They also know teachers who fail too many students find themselves under scrutiny and are unwelcome."

Supervisors have data chats with teachers and make clear that there should not be too many E's and D's, Stephens says. He says the commitment to mediocrity means weaker students are being urged to take the less-stressful ACT college entrance test instead of the SAT.

His solution is simple: If students don't get at least 50 percent on their countywide final, they should have to retake the course.

"This would go a long way to improving our true objective, which is to teach kids and have them actually learn," Stephens said.

He doesn't want teachers blamed for lax student performance, when the fault is a "whatever" culture nourished by district grading rules.

County schools spokesman Dana Tofig indicated that no changes in those rules are contemplated. He said the rise of ACT test-taking is a national trend, unaffected by any individual district culture. But he also confirmed that teachers may not assess the final exam as any more than 25 percent of the final grade.

"Using final examinations as a gateway to promotion is not an effective strategy in making sure our students are prepared for the next grade and are on a track to college and career readiness," Tofig said.

So what will motivate students not lusting after Johns Hopkins? Most U.S. high schools let average kids slip through without learning much, as the decades of no improvement show. If a district as strong and celebrated as Montgomery County can't get tough, who can?